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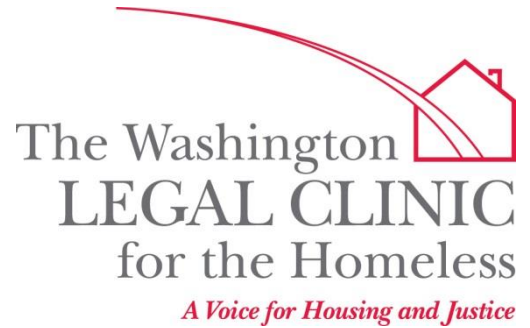
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**Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services
Oversight Hearing on the DC Department of Human Services (DHS)
Presented by Max Tipping
March 8, 2018**

Good morning Councilmember Nadeau and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Max Tipping and I am a Spitzer Fellow at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. The Legal Clinic envisions – and since 1987 has worked towards – a just and inclusive community for all residents of the District of Columbia, where housing is a human right and where every individual and family has equal access to the resources they need to thrive. My testimony today will focus DC's rapid re-housing program for families.

In May of last year, the Legal Clinic released a report on DC's rapid re-housing program for families, also known as the Family Re-housing and Stabilization Program or FRSP. Since that time, there have been a number of public conversations about the efficacy of FRSP, but the core issue that was raised in the report remains: the District is pushing families into a temporary housing program, knowing full well that when the program ends most families will not be able to afford the rent on their own. Despite this reality, I imagine that today this Committee will hear testimony today about some tremendous success rate for FRSP. But as the recent evaluations of DC's schools show, the devil is in the details, and underneath that tremendous success rate FRSP may well be the Ballou of DC's housing programs.

Income/Rent Disparity

The essential problem with using FRSP as the primary tool to address family homelessness in DC is the disparity between market rent and families' incomes. Most families in FRSP are receiving cash assistance of some kind, with 70 percent receiving TANF and 13 percent with a head of household receiving SSI or SSDI. In FY 2017, only 26 percent of families managed to increase their income, and the families who exited the program only had an average monthly income of \$541. Meanwhile, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment among FRSP participants was \$1,712. Again, that's \$541 in income and \$1,712 in rent. I think everyone knows that there is no way that families can remain in safe, stable housing after they have been forced into such an untenable situation.



Outcomes

Given that the available data suggest that most families cannot even cover the rent when the program ends, must less afford the rent along with other necessities, the obvious question is: what happens to them? Unfortunately, based on the data provided to this Committee, the answer to that question remains largely unknown.

In FY 2017, a staggering 1,184 families were exited from FRSP, nearly three times as many as the prior year. However, the reason for exit was only reported for 755 families, leaving more than one-third unaccounted for. And in contrast to previous years, DHS did not answer this Committee's question of how many families exited to permanent housing or with a long-term subsidy. However, the data that is available is not encouraging. Perhaps the most notable figure is that only 83 families exited the program because they were able to afford the full rent.

In terms of how many families returned to shelter within two years, the only time period that has complete information is FY 2015, since it has not yet been two years since FY 2016 ended. During that time period, 455 families exited FRSP and 140 of those families returned to shelter within two years. In other words, nearly one-third of families who exited FRSP ended up back in shelter. In addition, it is not clear whether this includes all families who sought assistance at Virginia Williams after exiting FRSP or only those were ultimately placed in shelter. And of course this does not track families' real-world outcomes after the program, and therefore does not capture families who have been evicted, or are homeless in another jurisdiction, or are sleeping on a friend's living room floor.

Conclusion

At best, all of these figures suggest that the District has very little idea of what is happening to most families once the program is over. At worst, the data suggest that many, if not most, of the families who exit FRSP are condemned to continued instability or homelessness. Despite these issues, the District continues to increase its reliance on this flawed program model. Over the last year, the budget for FRSP increased by \$2 million (from \$32 million to \$34 million) and program capacity increased by about 150 families (from 1,300 to 1,450 families).

In general, it seems that just about everyone involved in overseeing or administering this program is fine with the collateral damage caused by the status quo, by which I mean hundreds of families being set up for eviction and debt as they take on the full legal responsibility for rent that everyone knows they cannot afford to pay. However, I remain confident that sometime soon, maybe even this budget cycle, the District government will finally acknowledge that FRSP is simply not enough assistance for most families, and will invest sufficient resources in programs that actually address the disparity between families' income and their rent.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.